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ABSTRACT

The National Alliance of Business (NAB) reported recently on the National Workforce Assistance Collaborative that works with community colleges and other educational institutions to build their capacity to develop the work force of the 21st century. NAB had conducted a series of focus groups with participants from business, industry, education, government, and social services agencies to identify critical needs, important stakeholders, and promising delivery systems. Community colleges were already using the focus group process to enhance service to constituents and manage institutional change. This process drew upon important elements of already existing relationships. Focus groups studied ideas in a collective context. The hallmark of focus groups was explicit use of interpersonal interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction. The strengths of focus group analysis included the following: the results are understandable ar immediate; participants enjoy the opportunity to participate; the interaction created a favorable impression that the sponsors cared enough to listen; the process provided a richness of data at a reasonable cost; and the format allowed the moderator to probe. (Attachments include a chart illustrating characteristics of today's and tomorrow's workplace; a structure for the focus group process; ground rules; sample agenda form; checklist for focus group interviews; a diagnostic profile; and outline of focus group analysis.) (YLB)

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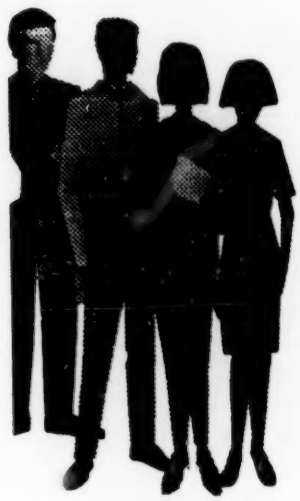
ED 378 402

Accountability, Assessment & Adult Development:

Focus Groups and Program Evaluation



Carousel Sessions

AVA
Dallas, TX

December 10. 1994

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Introduction

A generation ago, American society was experiencing profound change. A popular song intoned ". . . somethin's happenin' here; what it is ain't exactly clear." The high priest of pop music, Bob Dylan, developed an anthem, "The times, they are a changin'." The 1990s suggest deja vu. Old paradigms are disintegrating; new ones demand that Americans juggle many seemingly contradictory ideas simultaneously.

How is society to cope with omnipresent, omni-directional change? Education quickly becomes a focal point. Baker and Reed remark that demanding the refocusing of education as a solution to societal ills is a popular platitude used by politicians, business leaders, and others to diffuse responsibility.[1] The problem, they suggest, is the lack of a unifying construct which integrates the entire system. Too often, parts of the system are "tinkered with"; resulting is limited, short-term modifications. Extensive, systemic reform does not occur. Is any progress being made?

Lorenzo and LeCroy conducted a series of national assessments. They report that community colleges are ideally suited to pilot systemic reform. ". . . the central theme should be the molding of a fundamentally different institution--a college that builds on [a] history of community-based responsiveness, yet conforms more precisely to the emerging expectations, attitudes, behaviors, and conditions of the information age."[2] The process they

propose calls for implementing technology transfer across all educational genres. How should the dissemination take place?

The Critical Link: Workforce Development

The National Alliance of Business (NAB) reported recently on a partnership process that addresses the requirements listed above. The National Workforce Assistance Collaborative works with community colleges and other educational institutions to build the capacity of these "service providers" to develop the workforce of the 21st century. Focal points of the assistance include work place literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor/management relations. Bergman describes the task. "Capacity building, however, is not so much the end as the means for enabling [the partnership] to implement high performance work practices, become more competitive, and, ultimately, to advance the well-being of their employees."[3] Why does the collaborative focus on community colleges? She presents several reasons:

- Community colleges are effective in identifying appropriate information, resources, and tools;
- They are adept at developing and disseminating new products and tools;
- Community colleges are effective at delivering integrated services to small and mid-sized businesses;
- They are efficient at developing networks among varied service providers resulting in increased and improved services to the target population.[4]

How did the collaborative determine that community colleges should serve as the foundation for workforce development?

The NAB conducted a series of focus groups with participants drawn from business, industry, education, government, and social services agencies. The process identified critical needs, important stakeholders, and promising delivery systems. An unanticipated result of the activity was the discovery that community colleges were already using the focus group process to enhance service to constituents and manage institutional change. In conclusion, the collaborative:

- identified community colleges as key players in the U.S. Department of Labor's (USDL) work place extension strategy;
- recommended that the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) receive a workforce security project grant from USDL;
- contributed to AACC's development of a national network of community college workforce training providers;
- assisted with the creation of a national employment, training, and literacy database of community college programs.[5]

These outcomes emerged from the synergy between community colleges and the business communities they serve.

The Critical Incident: Focus Group Process

The synergy that exists between community colleges and their service areas has many sources. Some of them are informal, others structured. Recently, a new strategy has emerged--focus group analysis. The process draws upon important elements of already existing relationships. Focus

groups study ideas in a collective context. The design is based on a cherished geometric axiom: "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts." How does the process assist community colleges in developing workforce readiness?

The social sciences have contributed to the refinement of the axiom. Behavioral research reveals that meanings emerge over time and are refined through collective behavior. The "constitutive parts" of that behavior are identified through interaction within a group context. The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of interpersonal interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction. Krueger provides a summary of the strength of focus group analysis:

- The results are understandable and immediate;
- Participants enjoy the opportunity to participate;
- The interaction creates a favorable impression that the sponsors care enough to listen;
- The process provides a richness of data at a reasonable cost;
- The format allows the moderator to probe, thereby tapping into participants' perceptions, attitudes, and opinions in a real-life context.[6]

In summary, focus group process is a critical link in developing synergy between the community college and its constituency. The remainder of the presentation will be an interactive exploration of the who, what, when, where, and how of the strategy.

References

1. Baker, III, George A. and Reed, Jr., Lester W. "Creating a World-Class Work Force." Community College Journal. V. 64, #5 (April/May 1994), p. 31.

2. Lorenzo, Albert L. and LeCroy, Nancy Arunes. "A Framework for Fundamental Change in the Community College." Community College Journal. V. 64, #4 (February/March 1994), p. 16.

3. Bergman, Terri. "New Resources for Training: The National Workforce Assistance Collaborative." Community College Journal. V. 65, #2 (October/November 1994), p. 44.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., pp. 46-47.

6. Krueger, Richard A. Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988, pp. 176-177.

"Managing The Change Process"
Planning for change

Alice: Which way should I go?

Cat: That depends on where you are going.

Alice: I don't know where I'm going!

Cat: Then it doesn't matter which way you go!

Through the Looking-Glass, Lewis Carroll, 1872

What Needs to Be Changed

- What You Do, NOT What You ARE

CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY'S AND TOMORROW'S WORKPLACE[1]

TRADITIONAL MODEL	HIGH PERFORMANCE MODEL
STRATEGY	
• mass production	• flexible production
• long production runs	• customized production
• centralized control	• decentralized control
PRODUCTION	
• fixed automation	• flexible automation
• end-of-line quality control	• on-line quality control
• fragmentation of tasks	• work teams, multi-skilled workers
• authority vested in supervisor	• authority delegated to worker
HIRING AND HUMAN RESOURCES	
• labor-management confrontation	• labor-management cooperation
• minimal qualifications accepted	• screening for basic skills abilities
• workers as a cost	• workforce as an investment
JOB LADDERS	
• internal labor market	• limited internal labor market
• advancement by seniority	• advancement by certified skills
TRAINING	
• minimal for production workers	• training sessions for everyone
• specialized for craft workers	• broader skills sought

[1]Source: "Competing in the New International Economy." Washington: Office of Technology Assessment. 1990.

STRUCTURE FOR THE FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

Focus	Activity	Procedures	Time
I. Generating ideas	Individual analysis	Participants formulate individual response to task question	5 min.
	Response reporting	Individual responses are presented, listed on newsprint w/o discussion	10 min.
	Response analysis	Individual responses are discussed, clarified	5 min.
II. Ranking responses	Individual ranking	Participants use 3x5 cards to rank responses in order of importance	5 min.
	Recording group judgments	Participants' rankings are posted on newsprint next to original ranking	10 min.
III. Group priority setting	Participant discussion & analysis	Participants discuss, analyze & critique merits of the responses to the task question; consensus is sought on group ranking	15 min.
	Strategy summary	Responses are ranked in final order on master list (newsprint)	5 min.

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Ground Rules

In the interest of time and a fruitful discussion. we propose the following ground rules.

1. Group members address the questions asked and the tasking the group has been given. One speaker at a time. please.

2. The Recorder is to chart the comments and responses of group members. Group members should read what the recorder has written in order to insure its accuracy.

3. The Facilitator's job is to keep things moving and to assist the members in having a fruitful discussion. This includes questioning, redirecting, asking members for their thoughts. and watching the time.

4. The session will consist of:

   A brief introduction and adoption of Ground Rules
   The facilitated discussion
   A brief summary of comments and contributions.

5. Since the purpose of the session is to get as much information and recommendations as possible. ideas may be contributed freely without evaluation as being right or wrong.

6. Participants are responsible for the accuracy of charted/recorded information.

7. Everyone's opinion is to be heard. "Piggybacking" of one idea onto another is encouraged.

In table groups
COMPILE A LIST
of employer expectations
that current graduates can meet

Agenda

Issue _____

Desired Outcomes: By the end of this session, we will have:

_____

_____

_____

What (content)	**How** (process)	**Who**	**Time** (minutes)

Topics	Key Discussion Points, Decisions	Next Steps/ Actions (who, by when)

Relationship of Effort to Reward

What currently exists	What should exist

CHECKLIST FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Advance Notice

__ Contact participants by phone one to two weeks before the session.
__ Send each participant a letter of invitation.
__ Give the participants a reminder phone call prior to the session.
__ Slightly overrecruit the number of participants.

Questions

__ The introductory question should be answered quickly and not identify status.
__ Questions should flow in a logical sequence.
__ Key questions should focus on the critical issues of concern.
__ Use considered probe or follow-up questions.
__ Limit the use of "why" questions.
__ Use "think back" questions as needed.

Logistics

__ The room should be satisfactory (size, tables, comfort, and so on).
__ The moderator arrives early to make necessary changes.
__ Background noise should not interfere with the tape-recording.
__ Have name tags and/or name tents for participants.
__ A remote microphone should be placed on the table.
__ Bring extra tapes, batteries, and extension cords.
__ Plan topics for small talk conversation.
__ Seat experts and loud participants next to the moderators.
__ Seat shy and quiet participants directly across from moderator.
__ When having a meal, limit selections and stress fast service.
__ Bring enough copies of handouts and/or visual aids.

Moderator Skills

__ Be well rested and alert for the focus group session.
__ Practice introduction without referring to notes.
__ Remember questions without referring to notes.
__ Be cautious to avoid head nodding.
__ Avoid comments that signal approval, that is, "excellent," "great," "wonderful."
__ Avoid giving personal opinions.

Immediately after the Session

__ Prepare a brief written summary of key points as soon as possible.
__ Check to see if the tape recorder captured the comments.

A DIAGNOSTIC PROFILE

. The profile below will help you integrate your thinking.

Circle one number for each item:

To What Extent:

1.	Do customers honor and support *purposes*?	Completely	1	2	3	4	5	Not at all
2.	Is *structure* flexible enough for environment?	Too loose	1	2	3	4	5	Too rigid
3.	Is conflict managed to optimize *relationships*?	Well managed	1	2	3	4	5	Badly managed
4.	Are systems a source of *relationship* conflict?	No systems conflict	1	2	3	4	5	Serious conflict
5.	Are *rewards* adequate for *purposes*?	Adequate rewards	1	2	3	4	5	Inadequate rewards
6.	Do people feel *motivated* to perform?	High motivation	1	2	3	4	5	Poor motivation
7.	Is *leadership* style appropriate to issues?	Highly appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	Not at all appropriate
8.	Are existing *mechanisms* actually *helpful*?	Quite helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Quite hindering
9.	Is the *formal system* adequate in your opinion?	Quite adequate	1	2	3	4	5	Quite hindering
10.	Is the *informal system* adequate?	Quite adequate	1	2	3	4	5	Not at all adequate

Now make a couple of global judgments. *Overall*, how good is the "fit" of organization with environment?

Excellent fit 1 2 3 4 5 Poor fit

How good is the "fit" of individual and organization?

Excellent fit 1 2 3 4 5 Poor fit

Draw a straight line from circle to circle in the first ten items. The more items show to the left, the healthier the situation; the more to the right, the more difficulty in managing. Take a minute to visualize how the issues reinforce one another.

MINI-TIP

ACCOUNTABILITY, ASSESSMENT, AND ADULT DEVELOPMENT: FOCUS GROUPS AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

The focus group technique is a tool for studying ideas in group context. The process provides the opportunity to study the impact of adult education and training in an interactive setting. The strength of focus group analysis is that it produces data and insights that are less accessible without the interaction.

To apply focus group analysis successfully, the following points should be applied:

Participants
- Select those who have participated in the education/training and employers of participants
- Include as diverse a group as possible; base choice on age, gender, ethnicity, geography, etc.
- Where possible, have participants grouped so that they are unfamiliar with one another

Facilitation
- Provide a facilitator/recorder for each group
- The questions presented by the facilitator should be written and concise; the result will be comparability of data
- The amount of time per question or group should be announced at the beginning; time should be reserved for a summary at the conclusion of each phase

Operational Guidelines
- Everyone participates equally
- Ideas should be shared freely; evaluation is inappropriate at this stage
- "Piggybacking" of one idea onto another is encouraged
- Results should be in the form of task statements, descriptions of observable performance, or proposed actions

Assessment
- Have at least two people read each summary
- Seek consistency within group and between groups
- Focus on the specificity of responses
- Synthesize around major ideas/tasks
- Integrate based on the purpose of the report

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We are no longer the college
we once were.

We are not yet the college
we want to be.

We are a college dedicated to Continuous Quality Improvement.

(Adapted from Xerox)